

HPV vaccine fact sheet

What is HPV?

HPV stands for human papillomavirus. There are many different types of HPV.

Genital HPV is a very common sexually transmitted infection in men and women with around 80% being infected at some point in their lives. It usually causes no symptoms and goes away by itself, but can sometimes cause serious illness.

HPV-related cancers and disease

Genital HPV infection can cause cervical, vulval and vaginal cancer in women and penile cancer in men. It can also cause cancers of the anus and mouth/throat and genital warts in both men and women.

How do people get HPV?

HPV is passed on from one person to another through intimate genital-skin contact, usually without the person ever knowing it. The virus enters the body through tiny breaks in the skin.

Condoms offer some but not total protection from HPV, as they don't cover all of the genital skin. They do offer protection from many other sexually transmitted infections though, and help prevent unwanted pregnancy.

You can be exposed to HPV the first time sexual activity occurs, from only one sexual partner.

About the HPV vaccine

A vaccine has been developed that can give your child protection against the nine types of HPV (types 6, 11, 16, 18, 31, 33, 45, 52 and 58) that cause 90% of cervical cancers, most HPV-related penile cancers, a significant proportion of anal cancers, and 90% of genital warts.

As with any vaccine, the HPV vaccine may not fully protect everyone who is vaccinated and does not protect against all HPV types.

For people aged 14 and under, the vaccine is given as two injections in the upper arm six to 12 months apart, and works best if given before any sexual activity begins. It is expected to provide long lasting protection.

Two doses are available for free for people aged under the age of 19. If your child receives their first dose after the age of 15, or if they do not receive the injections at least six months apart, they will require three doses of the vaccine. You will need to pay for the third dose.

People aged 15 or over, or people who do not receive the injections at least six months apart, will need three injections. Ideally, the three doses should be given at 0, 2 and 6 months – that is, the second dose should be given two months after the first, and the third dose four months after the second.

The vaccine cannot cause cancer or other HPV-related illness. The vaccine was carefully tested before it was introduced and over 270 million doses have been given safely around the world.

The National HPV Vaccination Program

Girls and boys aged 12–13 can receive the HPV vaccine in school free of charge as part of the National HPV Vaccination Program.

The school year they receive it in varies between states and territories.

This is the only time your child will be able to receive the vaccine conveniently through school. If your child misses a dose at school, he or she will be able to 'catch up' that dose for free through a doctor or local immunisation provider. In some states catch up doses are offered at the school.

A consent form will be sent home from school, which must be signed by a parent or guardian and returned to school before students can be given the vaccine.

If you do not want your child to have the vaccine, note this on the form and return it to school.

The Australian Immunisation Register will record the contact and vaccination details provided on the consent form. In the future, female doses may be linked with National Cervical Screening Program data in order to monitor the vaccine's impact on cervical cancer rates.

Why should I consider the HPV vaccine for my child?

Having the HPV vaccine means your child is far less likely to develop HPV-related cancers and disease in the future.

The vaccine works best when given at a younger age. Research shows that younger people create more antibodies to the vaccine than those aged in their late teens. This means if your child has the vaccine at age 12–13, he or she is better protected against HPV in the future.

If I decide my child should have the vaccine, am I sending the wrong message?

You are not endorsing or promoting sexual activity if you decide to vaccinate your child.

Having the HPV vaccine is the same as having any other vaccine – a preventative health choice for the future. It is a normal part of growing up, with the vast majority of children vaccinated at school.

My child missed out on vaccination when it was offered at school last year – can he/she still get it?

It is not too late to get your child vaccinated. People aged under 19 can receive two doses for free through the National Immunisation Program's catch-up program.

If they are aged over 15 when they receive their first dose, a third dose will be required. You will need to purchase the third dose. Contact your local immunisation provider or doctor to organise vaccination.

Will my daughter still need Cervical Screening tests in the future if she has the vaccine?

Yes. The vaccine doesn't protect against all of the HPV types that can lead to cervical cancer, so your daughter will still need Cervical Screening Tests every five years from the age of 25, if she has ever been sexually active.

Cancer Council and the World Health Organization fully endorse HPV vaccination programs as part of an integrated cervical cancer prevention strategy that includes regular cervical cancer screening for women and sexual health education.

More information: Contact your local immunisation provider or doctor. Visit www.hpvvaccine.org.au.